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TRANSPORTATION IN CALIFORNIA BEFORE THE RAILROADS, WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO LOS ANGELES

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One of the most serious problems of early California life was the lack of local and transcontinental transportation facilities. While this situation was naturally most acute during the abnormal period of the gold rush, yet even with the coming of a more settled and regular order of society the convenience and economic development of the people of the State suffered for many years because of inadequate means of communication.

To ameliorate these conditions, efforts of various kinds were put forth from time to time, sometimes on individual initiative, sometimes through state or national legislation. Road building was naturally regarded as one of the essential elements in solving the difficulty, and was undertaken both at private and public expense. In September, 1854, for instance, some of the people of Los Angeles raised \$6,000 for the construction of a wagon road between Fort Tejon and Los Angeles. The work was completed in December of the same year.¹ In 1855 the California Legislature appropriated \$100,000 for a road through Johnston's cut-off in the Sierra Nevada Mountains; \$20,000 for a road from San Pedro through Cajon Pass to the State line, in the direction of Salt Lake City; and \$7,000 for a road from San Diego over the desert to the Colorado River.²

About the same time the Federal Government voted \$50,000 for the Los Angeles-Salt Lake road, upon which one of the earliest overland mail services was afterward inaugurated.³

As the State grew in population and cities increased both in number and size, travel necessarily became greater and a very marked commercial development took place. To meet these growing needs, local transportation companies sprang up like mushrooms. Nearly all of these carried freight, passengers, express or mail, as the opportunity arose. Many of them grew into large and flourishing companies, and played a very vital part in the upbuilding of the State.

The most important of these local transportation companies, with headquarters in Los Angeles, was that of Alexander and Banning. As early as 1854 this firm had 500 mules, 30 or 40 horses, 40 wagons, and 15 stages running between Los Angeles and San

1. Hayes Collection (Bancroft Library, University of California), Southern California Local History, II, 86.

2. *Ibid.*, V, 301.

3. *California Star*, December 13, 1856 (Hayes Collection)

Pedro. Two other lines were also operated between the same cities, one by Lanfranco and Sepulveda, and the other by Banning's chief rival, A. W. Timmes.⁴

The fastest time on record over this route is said to have been 1 hour and 18 minutes for the entire twenty-seven miles, including three changes of horses. It was made by an express rider bringing the news of Buchanan's election from the mail steamer at San Pedro to Los Angeles in 1856.⁵

Besides San Pedro, Salt Lake was another city with which Los Angeles had important commercial relations. In 1854 the Adams Express Company began a monthly service between San Francisco and Salt Lake, by way of Los Angeles. From the latter city the route, according to the company's advertisement, included the following settlements: El Monte, San Bernardino, Cold Creek, Johnston's Springs, Parowan, Ked Creek, Fillmore City, Nephi City, Summit Creek, Payson's, Provo City, and American Fork.⁶ The following year the California Stage Company added a line of stages to this route; and of more importance still, a very considerable freight business sprang up between the two cities. This was rendered all the more important because heavy winter snows ordinarily shut off communication between Salt Lake and St. Louis on the one hand, and San Francisco on the other, during a large part of the year, leaving the Los Angeles-Salt Lake route the only available source of supply for the Mormon settlements. To take advantage of this "natural monopoly", Hopkins and Robbins of San Bernardino set out on April 15th, 1855, with several wagons and a very considerable amount of freight for Salt Lake; while twelve days later Alexander and Banning, with W. T. B. Sanford, left Los Angeles with fifteen ten-mule teams and some thirty tons of merchandise, valued at about \$20,000. Freight charges ranged from 18 to 25 cents a pound.⁷

As trade developed, large amounts of goods were sent from San Francisco by water to San Pedro for trans-shipment overland to Salt Lake. A hundred tons of such freight, it is said, were stored in Los Angeles warehouses at one time awaiting transportation to the Utah settlements.⁸

Other local routes were opened from time to time in addition to those just mentioned. Wells-Fargo & Company operated between Los Angeles and the Tejon. Alexander and Banning ran freight wagons from Mojave and Yuma to Los Angeles, and in 1855 put on a weekly stage from the latter city to the newly discovered mining fields of the Kern River.⁹

Important, however, as these local lines were to the economic

4. *Southern News*, Sept. 14, 1854 (Hayes Collection).

5. *Star*, Dec. 6, 1856.

6. Hayes Collection, *So. Cal. Local Hist.*, II; III; V; 355.

7. *Star*, April 14, 28; May 2, 30; Nov. 2, 1855.

8. Hayes Collection, *So. Cal. Local Hist.*, V, 78.

9. *Southern California*, Feb. 1, 8, 1855.

welfare of the communities they served, the vital interest of the Californian lay in the problem of transcontinental communication, particularly as this applied to the transmission of mail and of eastern news. For nearly ten years after the discovery of gold, with the few exceptions to be noted elsewhere, the people of the state were compelled to rely wholly upon the Pacific Mail Steamship Company for this highly important service.

Although the company drew an annual subsidy of \$700,000 for carrying a monthly mail between New York and San Francisco, it performed its functions in a most abominable manner, if the literature of the time is at all to be relied upon. Even when the service was made semi-monthly in 1851, the southern part of the state still suffered most exasperating delays in receiving its long over due mail. Letters from New York were sometimes seven or eight months reaching Los Angeles, since the vessels of the company frequently failed to stop at San Diego on either northward or southward voyage, but carried the Los Angeles mail from the Isthmus to San Francisco and back again to Panamá, with fine disregard for the impatient people of Southern California.¹⁰

Regularly appointed postmasters were rare; and many a good sized community was entirely without mail facilities. Even the people of San Bernardino, a town at that time of 500 inhabitants, were compelled to go more than sixty miles to Los Angeles to find the nearest postoffice.

The Californians, especially those of the southern part of the state, were naturally anxious to end such a state of affairs, and had long been agitating for a regular overland mail service to the eastern states. Prior to 1857, indeed, a few abortive attempts had been made by Congress and private individuals to inaugurate such a service, but the people of the state derived little immediate good from such efforts. The most ambitious undertaking of this kind was that of Absalom Woodward and George Chorprenning, with whom the United States Government contracted, April 25th, 1851, for a monthly mail service each way between Salt Lake City and Sacramento. The first route followed "was along the regular emigrant road through Placerville, crossing the Sierras at Carson's Canyon, then following along Carson and Humboldt Rivers, and around the northern end of the lake to Salt Lake City". Thirty days was allowed for the journey; but though the route was only about 900 miles in length, the winter found it impassable, and Chorprenning was obliged to abandon it during several months of each year for the much more circuitous plan of sending the mails to San Pedro by sea and thence overland to Salt Lake. Indian attacks on this northern route were also frequent, even in summer. So, while the Government subsidy, which amounted to only \$14,000 a year, was afterwards increased, and a shorter road opened between

10. Hayes Collection, So. Cal. Local Hist., V, 330, 331, 335, 347.

Placerville and Salt Lake, through northern Nevada, Chorpenning's project never gave adequate service, nor repaid the contractors by several hundred thousand dollars for the money and labor invested.¹¹

The chief reasons for this slow development of the overland mail service on a large scale were, first, the very powerful and well-organized opposition of the Pacific Mail to a rival carrier; and, second, the intense sectional jealousy between Northern and Southern California, and of western and southern states as to the location of the route. Almost every emigrant trail running into the state was looked upon by its particular advocate as the only line over which the mails should be carried, but eventually the contest narrowed down to three main routes.

The first of these, much frequented by early immigrants, ran from Independence, Missouri, and later from St. Joseph, to Salt Lake, by way of Fort Laramie, Bridger, and the South Pass. Over this part of the route a monthly mail service was almost continuously maintained by various contractors¹² from 1850 on, both to serve the Mormon settlements in Utah and the United States military forces operating in those regions. But from Salt Lake to California this northern route was almost impassable during the winter months, as Chorpenning found by hard experiment.

The second much discussed route left Springfield, Missouri, followed the Canadian River for some distance, passed through Albuquerque, eventually reached the Mojave River, and there turned northward to the Tejon Pass. From the Tejon, one branch led to Los Angeles, while another continued up the San Joaquin Valley to San José and San Francisco. This route, commonly known as the 35° route, or Beale's, was apparently the most favored of the three by mail contractors.

The southern route, which eventually obtained the Government subsidy, will be described in detail later. It is sufficient here to point out that while considerably longer than either of its rivals, and running for much of the way through barren or even desert country, it had the great advantage of being open the year round and was thus considered the most available of the three.¹³

In the closing hours of Pierce's administration, the "Overland California Mail" bill, after a deal of wrangling, eventually passed Congress. Under the terms of this act the Postmaster General was empowered to advertise for bids for the transportation of all letter mail from the Mississippi to San Francisco. The contract was to run for six years and called for a subsidy of \$300,000

11. Owen C. Coy, "The Pony Express Antedated," *The Grizzly Bear*, February, 1917.

12. Root and Connelly, *Overland Stage to California*, pp. 1-2.

13. For a full description of the three routes see the *New York Herald*, Sept., 1858. (Hayes Collection, San Diego, II, 86).

A semi-monthly mail was already in operation between San Antonio and San Diego. This ran over the so-called Jim Birch route, through the Pecos Valley, to the 31st parallel, thence to El Paso, Yuma, Warner's Ranch, and San Diego. *N. Y. Herald*, Sept., 1858.

annually for semi-monthly; \$450,000 for weekly, or \$600,000 for semi-weekly service, as the Postmaster General should decide.¹⁴ Nine bids were made for this contract, but the award finally went to the Butterfield Overland Mail Company, a concern closely affiliated with Wells-Fargo & Company, and controlled almost entirely by New York stockholders. St. Louis was made the great depot of supply by the company; and since the southern route was chosen for the conveyance of the mails, all sections of the country, as a contemporary newspaper pointed out, thus shared the advantages of the contract on nearly equal terms.¹⁵

The route of the Overland Mail, as Butterfield's Company came to be known, can best be shown from the following table of distances and time printed in a newspaper of the period:¹⁶

	Miles	Hrs. Min.
San Francisco to Los Angeles.....	464	80:00
Los Angeles to Fort Yuma.....	280	72:20
Fort Yuma to Tucson.....	280	71:45
Tucson to Franklin (El Paso).....	360	82:00
Franklin to Fort Chadbourne.....	428	128:40
Fort Chadbourne to Colbert's Ferry (Red River)	283	62:25
Colbert's Ferry to Fort Smith.....	192	38:00
Fort Smith to Tipton.....	313	48:55
Tipton to St. Louis (Railroad).....	160	11:40

Between Los Angeles and San Francisco the route passed through San José, Gilroy, Pacheco Pass, Fresno City, Visalia, Fort Tejon, French John's, San Fernando and a score of other points which at that time enjoyed a name and a reputation.¹⁷

From St. Louis to San Francisco the postage in first-class mail was 3 cents a half ounce. Three sacks of letters, averaging 170 pounds in weight, and a newspaper bag, of about 140 pounds, were usually carried by each coach. These coaches were substantially built, drawn by four or six mules or horses, and at a pinch could accommodate six passengers. They traveled day and night, running on a maximum schedule of twenty-five days for the entire trip. This maximum, however, was seldom reached, and where delays occurred they were usually the result of Indian attack or flooded rivers. There was some irregularity, however, in the mail service between Memphis and Fort Smith, and as the Butterfield stages picked up the southern mail at this point for conveyance to California, such irregularity frequently interfered with the schedule. Probably the quickest trip on record was made in 1859 when the mail leaving St. Louis September 16th reached Los Angeles on October 3rd, having been on the road seventeen days, six hours and ten minutes.¹⁸

14. Root and Connelly, 6-7.

15. *Philadelphia Enquirer*, (Hayes Collection, San Diego, II, 20.)

16. Hayes, So. Cal. Local History, IV, 119.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Star*, Nov. 12, 1859.

The business of the Butterfield Company was conducted in a thoroughly systematic manner and on a very large scale. The equipment consisted of more than a hundred Concord coaches, a thousand horses, and five hundred mules, while nearly eight hundred men were in the employ of the company.¹⁹ Stations were built, wherever possible, at ten-mile intervals, the Government allowing 320 acres of land for building and grazing purposes at each station. The buildings were commonly made of adobe; and wherever Indian dangers threatened, a guard of twenty or twenty-five men protected the company's property and stock or accompanied the coach through the hostile country.²⁰

The fare from Memphis or St. Louis to San Francisco was \$200. Passengers had to furnish their own meals but were given facilities for preparing them at the company stations. Each passenger was allowed to carry forty pounds of baggage without cost. He was advised to equip himself for the journey with the following outfit: One Sharp's rifle and a hundred cartridges; a Colt's navy revolver and two pounds of balls; a knife and sheath; a pair of thick boots and woolen pants; a half dozen pairs of thick cotton socks; six undershirts; three woolen undershirts; a wide-awake hat; cheap sack coat, and soldier's overcoat; one pair of blankets in summer and two in winter; a piece of India rubber cloth, a pair of gauntlets, a small bag of needles, pins, etc.; two pair of thick drawers, three or four towels, and various toilet articles.²¹

The Overland Mail was looked upon by all right-minded Southern Californians as a local institution, or at least as belonging principally to the southern part of the state. Northern California was somewhat chagrined at the choice of the southern route, while many of the states of the Mississippi Valley likewise felt aggrieved at the Postmaster General's decision. Although a mail service was maintained between Placerville and St. Joseph, Missouri, by way of Salt Lake; and a line was supposed to run from Stockton to Kansas City by way of Albuquerque, neither of these could compete successfully with the Butterfield subsidy.²²

Partly, therefore, as a result of this sectional rivalry and partly to meet a real economic need, one of the most spectacular of western institutions was inaugurated in the spring of 1860. This was the long famous Pony Express, more important from the standpoint of romance than of commercial success. The first trip of this new and short-lived enterprise was begun amid great enthusiasm. From the San Francisco *Bulletin* of April 7th, 1860, comes this description:

"From 1 o'clock till a quarter to 4 on Tuesday last, a clean-limbed, hardy little nankeen colored pony stood at the door of the

19. Root and Connelly, 11.

20. Hayes Collection, So. Cal. Local Hist., V, 396, 403.

21. Hayes Collection, San Diego Local, II, 50, 61.

22. Root and Connelly (p. 6) state that only two letters and twenty-six newspapers were received at Stockton from Kansas City in nine months. The Government paid \$80,000 for this service.

Alta Telegraph Company's office—the pioneer pony of the famous express which that day began its first trip across the continent. The little fellow looked all unaware of his famous future. Two little flags adorned his head-stall, from the pommel of his saddle hung, on each side, a bag lettered "Overland Pony Express". The broad saddle, wooden stirrups, immense flappers to guard the rider's feet, and the girth that knows no buckle, were of the sort customary in California for swift horsemen who appreciate mud. At a quarter to 4 he took up his line of march to the Sacramento boat. Personally, he will make short work, and probably be back in a day; but by proxy he will put the West behind his heels like a very Puck, and be in at New York in thirteen days from this writing. At 3 o'clock the letters he had to carry numbered 53; probably his whole cargo will be 75 or 80 letters at \$5 each. Those which use both pony and telegraph expect to be landed in New York in nine days after quitting San Francisco."²³

The figures in this typical western venture were picked with great care and represented the hardest and bravest of western men. Each rider was provided with a complete buckskin suit with hair on the outside to shed the rain. He also carried four Colt's six shooters, eight inches in length; and a knife eighteen inches long, with a tube containing mercury running along the back. When a blow was struck, the mercury, by rushing toward the point of the blade, added its weight to the force of the rider's arm. Each man rode a stretch of one hundred miles, though on occasion riders were known to carry the mail three times the regular distance without rest or sleep. Eleven hours was the maximum time allowed for the hundred miles, and each rider was required to make at least 400 miles a week.²⁴

The Pony Express, except in the hardest weather, furnished a much more rapid service than the Overland Mail, but its charges were high,²⁵ it had no government subsidy, and its route was subject to serious blockades by snow. This last difficulty sometimes furnished the good citizens of Los Angeles with cause for rejoicing. When, for example, in February, 1861, the dispatches brought by the Overland Mail to Los Angeles were telegraphed to San Francisco, arriving there ahead of the Pony Express, a great celebration was held in the southern metropolis in honor of the Overland Mail and the Pacific and Atlantic Telegraph.²⁶ And it may be remarked in passing that a celebration in the Los Angeles society of the sixties was always carried out with spirit and fervor—a large part of which, whatever the occasion, came out of kegs, bottles, and other containers of potential enthusiasm.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, the Butterfield mail service,

23. Hayes Collection, So. Cal. Local Hist., V, 104.

24. Hayes Collection, So. Cal. Local Hist., VIII, 223.

25. The rates were afterwards reduced from \$5 to \$1.50.

26. "Star", Feb. 9, 1861.

since it ran through southern territory the larger part of the way, was discontinued. Part of the equipment owned by the company was seized by the Confederates; part was sold to the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express (C. O. C. & P. P.), a recently organized and very powerful company, operating between Salt Lake and Atchison, Missouri; while the remainder was used to establish a line between Salt Lake and Virginia City, Nevada.²⁷

This line was soon run in connection with the Pioneer Stage from Virginia City to Sacramento, and with the C. O. C. & P. P., from Salt Lake to Atchison, thus establishing a through service from Sacramento to the Missouri. A daily mail service was soon inaugurated over this route and a schedule maintained under which each coach made a minimum of 112 miles a day. The presiding genius of the new overland line was the widely known Ben Holladay. Obtaining an annual subsidy of \$1,000,000 for the transmission of through and local mails between Atchison and Sacramento, Holladay enlarged his equipment, improved the passenger service, and extended his business so successfully that he finally had some 3300 miles of stage lines under his control. In 1866, he sold his entire business to the Wells-Fargo interests, a company that had already gotten possession of the Pioneer Stage and the original Overland Mail.²⁸

In 1868 the Government granted Wells-Fargo a yearly subsidy of \$1,750,000 for a daily mail service to California. Stages were restored to the old Butterfield route, but the age of railroads was at hand and the day of the overland stage came to an end. It had served its purpose, however, by writing a new chapter in western romance and breaking down the isolation of a state.

27. Hayes Collection, So. Cal. Local Hist., V, 409.

28. Root and Connelly, 47, 49.